

In Search of the Slave Ship *Henrietta Marie*

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The wreck of the *Henrietta Marie* is one of the most significant historical shipwreck sites found in the waters of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The remains of this English merchant slave ship are found on remote New Ground Reef, nearly 35 miles west of Key West. The site was first discovered by Mel Fisher and his Treasure Salvors, Inc. in 1972 during their search for the galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*. After some explorations of the site, and recovery of artifacts during that and the following summer, the *Henrietta Marie* was essentially forgotten for the next ten years.

In 1983, renewed efforts were made at the site by shipwreck salvor Henry Taylor, under an agreement with Mel Fisher. Most important, Fisher and Taylor employed archaeologist David Moore to oversee the excavation and research that was conducted. For the next two years, they examined the portions of the wreck that had been seen in the 1970s and made many more important discoveries, including that of the ship's bell, which bore the inscription "Henrietta Marie 1699." With this find, the site, which had long been known as the "English wreck," suddenly had a name and a date, allowing historical researchers to flesh out her story. Through the combination of archaeological and documentary research, it became clear that this long-lost ship had been responsible for transporting captive Africans across the Atlantic for the slave trade. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society began to spearhead further research into the ship. Additional fieldwork in 1991 saw the recovery of two iron cannons from the site. A monument, dedicated to the Africans forced to sail on the ship, was placed on the site in 1993 by the National Association of Black Scuba Divers. In 1995 a traveling museum exhibition began its nationwide tour of the United States, telling the tale of the *Henrietta Marie's* cruel venture, and the ship's place in history.

The *Henrietta Marie* made two voyages as a slaveship. The first was in 1697-98 and resulted in the sale of over 200 people at Barbados. For her second, she loaded English goods – iron and copper bars, pewter ware, glass beads, cloth, and brandy – for trade on the west coast of Africa. Evidence suggests she traded at New Calabar, in what is now Nigeria. There, she took on a cargo

of Africans, most likely Igbo tribesmen, and elephants tusks. In May of 1700, she arrived at Port Royal, Jamaica, selling 191 Africans to sugar planters. After purchasing 48 tons of sugar, logwood, cotton and ginger with the proceeds garnered from the sale of her human cargo, the *Henrietta Marie* set sail for London in late June. Having rounded the west coast of Cuba to avoid pirates and catch the Gulf Stream current, the *Henrietta Marie* wrecked on New Ground Reef. The circumstances of the loss are not recorded, as there were no survivors, but from the archaeological evidence, it would appear that a violent storm drove the ship onto the reef, smashing it to pieces. The last contemporary evidence for the ship is a legal notation from November 1700 granting the estate of her captain, Thomas Chamberlain, to his creditors. By then it had become clear that the *Henrietta Marie* would not return to England.



The *Henrietta Marie* was an English merchant slave ship that wrecked off Key West in 1700. Artist drawing by Peter Copeland, Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society.

Work on the site continues today. The Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society, and RPM Nautical Foundation, both of Key West, have joined forces to re-examine the wreck, and to locate sections of the ship known to be missing. Since 2001, these groups have been conducting magnetometer surveys and excavations to identify not only the remains of the *Henrietta Marie*, but any cultural materials that might be found on New Ground. To do this, an area of nine miles by three miles is being systematically investigated

for variations in the earth's magnetic field. Such magnetic anomalies are often caused by iron from shipwrecks. In the case of the *Henrietta Marie*, it is known that six cast-iron cannons are missing, along with iron trade bars and many other ferrous components. Over 30 years after its initial discovery, the *Henrietta Marie* continues to be a vital and important part of our maritime past. It has made the mechanics of the Transatlantic Slave Trade a tangible reality, and with new discoveries on the horizon, will further reveal the secrets of the past in its eloquently unique way.

For instructional materials and more information, visit: <http://www.melfisher.org/henriettamarie/>.

Note: This article appeared in the Spring/Summer 2004 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line**. For more information, visit: floridakeys.noaa.gov.